

JEREMY WELSH

INTERVIEW PART II

In the second half of her two part interview - the first part was previously published in our May edition - Catherine Elwes continues her profile of one of the UK video scene's most prominent characters.

In this second part of our conversation Jez mapped out his views on the post-modern predicament. I was intrigued to hear how structuralist thinking had sunk into the deeper gloom of post-modernism - the death of the author, the discrediting of notions of originality and progress, the rejection of artistic consistency. As ever, I found it hard to sympathise with these latest attempts to paralyse artists with theory. Since women artists have historically experienced a continuous state of authorial death, re-birth on a massive scale was what I thought we should be after. However, Jez Welsh is by no means a hard line post-modern nihilist. He has his own ideas about how to coax art theory into a more positive frame of mind. But we began on a very practical note.

CATHERINE ELWES: Your work has included a critique of consumerism, yet your everyday life is taken up with selling video art. You have to play the game and be good at it. Nowadays we all have to be salespeople. I suppose those who haven't got the knack aren't going to fare so well.

JEZ WELSH: Yes, everyone is going to have to be better at business in the future. Even at the level of being able to continue making work. The reason the American and French video artists are more successful is that they have a much firmer belief in themselves and are prepared to go out and sell themselves hard to get what they want.

C.E: Do they do all of that themselves?

J.W: Some have agents doing it for them, but they only get agents by doing it for themselves initially.

C.E: I still cherish the romantic idea that if an artist is talented enough s/he will get discovered by some committed administrator somewhere. Do you think this is wishful thinking?

J.W: Yes, I think it is. Throughout history

there must have been great undiscovered artists who remained undiscovered and no-one ever knew. These days I think everyone has to work hard to make themselves visible.

C.E: But there is a danger in this. I have noticed that when people apply for bursaries, particularly when it involves TV money, they gear their proposals to an idea of what they think the Arts Council is looking for - mostly narratives with a few video tricks thrown in. Do you think that with television as the new consumer, we are tailoring our work to their needs rather than making television work for us?

J.W: I don't think its possible to make television work for us in any grand way. We are extremely small and TV is extremely big. No artist or pressure group has the power to reverse that relationship. It's not surprising that people at the moment are opportunistically making things that they think TV will buy. Leaving aside installation work, TV may become the only source of experimental film and video. But I think TV itself needs challenging, experimental work from artists. TV is the most powerful cultural tool that currently exists. It would be massively irresponsible to turn one's back on it and say it doesn't matter. Its not just television. New developments in technology are going to change the way that visual imagery is produced, distributed and consumed. Video is a stepping stone, but with the onset of digital video and the inter-relationship of computer and video technology, new tools of communication are going to emerge that will be as revolutionary for artists as was the invention of oil paint. This could be the opportunity for artists to move into a more central position in visual culture. Throughout the twentieth century artists activities have been progressively marginalised. We are in danger of becoming completely detached from and irrelevant to the rest of society.

C.E: When you say marginalised what/ where are those margins?

J.W: There are the avant-garde margins where we have existed for some time. We don't form part of the art commodities market. We aren't prominent there.

C.E: But we did enjoy a few moments of glorious visibility in the 70's. Then the margin was the centre. People like Stuart Brisley were getting the biggest monies from the Arts Council - more than painters were getting from sales. Even now many painters consider us lucky to be able to apply for grants. They can't.

J.W: Yes, but the gallery and dealer system has made a massive recovery in the 80's. A committed painter has the opportunity to sell and survive. Future digital technologies have quite different implications from earlier painterly forms that refer back to Renaissance ideas of representation or even the the modernist project of purity and refinement. When images are digitally reproduced and replicated, they need not make any reference to anything in the real world. They begin to evolve a narrative of their own - a bit like genetic engineering or developments in particle physics. It relates more to what's happening in science than to what people are thinking about in art. But its challenging our fundamental view of reality, we have to make some adjustments, find new ways of thinking about things.

C.E: Most of the images I've seen produced digitally on computers relate either to recognisable objects or forms of abstraction that come out of the modernist tradition. The only difference being that the image is pixilated, like newsprint. I don't see any great change in attitude in the people who have access to these new technologies.

J.W: No, not at the moment. But the work does not extend the notions put forward by Walter Benjamin in 'The Work Of Art

Profile

And The Age Of Mechanical Reproduction'. He questions the idea of originality and authenticity. The process is accelerated when it comes to digital reproduction. It's more sophisticated, more instant, and more total than any form of mechanical reproduction. The perfect copy is not only possible but inevitable. If the original is produced electronically then the first generation copy is exactly the same and so is the next one and the next one. There is never any distinction between the original and the million copies. So, the notion of an object becomes difficult to pin down.

C.E: In the interactive computer systems the object can be transformed as it is transmitted or as it is received. At Coventry Poly it's the the fine art students rather than the computer graphics students who are interested in these ideas. They are challenging notions of authorship as well as the uniqueness of the object...but at a more mundane level, what then are the implications for the marketing of our precious video-art products? For instance, we already have works made for television that are also distributed by LVA (London Video Access) but can be the property of anyone who sets their VTR's to record the original broadcast.

J.W: Everyone making images, films or music in an electronically reproducible medium is facing that problem. Musical copyright is as impossible to enforce as television copy-right is. Perhaps the role of artists is to think of ways of making creative interventions, interferences into the structures that exist and make other unpredictable things happen. Maybe force a little gap and demonstrate that not all the possibilities are sewn up.

C.E: In terms of the image, most of this new technology has had a commercial application. An artist would hope to challenge assumptions, question received ideas, or so we thought in the 70's. Do you still see this as a worthwhile ambition?

J.W: Yes, and there are artists who still try to do that. There are others who use the media like advertisers do - to sell something. The artists are essentially selling themselves and their continuing status as artists. We read about the collapse of meaning in media culture. Everything is reduced to the level of marketing and replication. It would be easy for artists to sync into that without attempting to broaden the category.

C.E: There are certain things that I look for in media work. A refusal to take form for granted, an awareness of what visual rules television is laying down, a desire to shift the perceptions of the viewer away from familiar expectations and a sense

that the work relates strongly to a lived experience. If any of these is missing, the result is likely to be simplistic or mechanical. In the 70's a lot of work was enslaved to theory, post-modern theory can be as debilitating. But maybe I don't quite grasp the concepts. You were saying that one post-modern strategy is an attempt to re-invent our own history, cutting out the whole modernist period which is associated with America.

J.W: If we take the architectural model, in this country modern architecture is associated with Wilson and the labour government, the socialism of the 60's. Now we see the modernist belief in social planning and control being bankrupted and ultimately rejected. There's an immense nostalgia for a past vision of England, a return to Victorian values and the re-invention of the Georgian as an ideal.

C.E: Charles Harrison says there's a similar move back to traditional British Painting as immortalised in the pages of 'Modern Painters' which he sees as a form of artistic jingoism.

J.W: Yes, I heard Peter Fuller described as the first Tory Marxist...in an interview he was saying how Mediterranean light might be all right for the cultivation of grapes but you really need this dull grey British light to produce meaningful painting!

By any criterion that's absolute rot. We are not noted for having produced a large number of great painters as many Mediterranean countries have. This kind of anti-foreign, anti-internationalism is rife in our society and very worrying.

C.E: You said earlier that the solution to the post-modern predicament could be the re-introduction of 'The Modern'. Art should make progress, change, but maintain a sense of social responsibility and a commitment to ecology. I heard about a Chicago video artist who had gone through a post-modernist phase and was now pursuing what he called 'Deeper Ecology'.

J.W: Yes, I'd like to see a new optimism. I can see a value in the 'old' modern idea of working towards the ideal society, taking in the new technologies that are ecologically sound and socially responsible.

C.E: Work already exists that is socially aware: community video, feminist video etc. Would this work form part of your vision of the future?

J.W: What I'm getting at is something else. As far as artists are concerned its a case of regaining the confidence to say

new things in new ways and to get beyond just using pastiche and quotation-the re-referencing game.

C.E: But isn't the pursuit of the new part of the whole commercial system of art of which post-modernism is the latest commodity.

J.W: But that's a pursuit of novelty. I mean that in a deeper more philosophical sense there is a need for new forms of thought. To a large extent it will be dictated by the new and more complex society that the media and new technologies will produce.

C.E: You say that on the one hand there has to be a new 'modern' response to developments in technology but at the same time you propose a concern for ecology and the environment. The new technologies may not be environment friendly. There is already concern about the levels of radiation emissions from VDU's. You are bringing together what might seem to be two opposing elements.

J.W: Yes, the dangers are not just physical but also the theoretical transformed into actual damage to the social fabric. Particularly when the means of delivery are so sophisticated that people as consumers become isolated and fragmented from any idea of the social. People who use the medium are going to have to think what their responsibility is. If at the end of the 1990's, the consumer is sitting in a living room with a piece of apparatus in the corner and has no reason to ever go out...What function will art have in that?

C.E: Perhaps the best thing we can hope to do is persuade people to abandon the machine and strike up a conversation with another human being.

Catherine Elwes

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